The Dangerous Mysteries of Consciousness

We still need answers.

By Ron Rosenbaum

There's a certain kind of mystery—unsolved and probably insoluble—that has a seductive attraction for me. I think the insolubility is the attraction. Historical and literary mysteries: What was the origin of Hitler's hatred? Did Shakespeare revise Hamlet? And I'm particularly troubled by metaphysical mysteries, the essential but oh-so-slippery mysteries of existence. Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the origin and nature of consciousness? What distinguishes living from nonliving being?

I can't get past the idea that they may never be solved. And what's most irritating is when people seem unaware they have not been solved. Or when people who should know better proclaim there are no real mysteries left. Consider, for instance, the problem of the origin and nature of consciousness. The failure to solve it without resorting to religion or quasi-religious "intelligent design"—which offers no real resolution since it doesn't explain what created the consciousness behind the intelligence of intelligent design—strikes many observers as dangerous. Dangerous because it threatens the foundation of scientific rationalism and materialism. Dangerous because it disrupts one's sense of any order in the universe and opens the floodgates of chaos.

"Consciousness is the only thing in the world and the greatest mystery." This was Martin Amis at recent prepublication celebration of Nabokov's The Original of Laura, at the 92nd Street Y, paraphrasing Nabokov, whose ability to evoke the tenor and texture of consciousness may be one of his most distinctive talents as a writer. Did it come from the fact that Nabokov was gifted with "synesthesia"—itself a mystery of consciousness—which he experienced as the ability to see sounds as sight, as colors? The sound made by the letter "K" for instance, is something he said he experienced as the color of huckleberry. What an extraordinary, colorful spectacle his own words on the page must have been to him. If only we could reproduce it as he saw it.

(By the way, one of the reasons I had reservations about the publication of Laura was that I worried people would review it as a finished book when in fact it was an early draft. What I
didn't expect was that people who claimed to share these concerns went ahead and reviewed it as though it were a finished book, gleefully heaping scorn on Nabokov's less well-turned phrases.)

But even for those of us who don't have synesthesia, the pageant, the palette of consciousness is one of life's great unsolved mysteries. I was reminded of the vexing mystery of consciousness a few days before the Nabokov event when I found a link on the valuable Bookforum blog to an essay in the Philosophers' Magazine by Raymond Tallis, a philosopher whose regular critiques of Postmodernism and its metaphysics (especially those of Foucault) I'd admired for some years in the London Times Literary Supplement.

Here, in an essay titled "The Unnatural Selection of Consciousness," Tallis took on what he regards as the overconfident assumptions of some evolutionists, who argue that the problem of the evolution of consciousness will be solved the same way the problems of the evolution of the Panda's thumb or the beak of the finch had been.

Neither Tallis, an atheist, nor I, an agnostic, are anti-evolutionists. I hope science will one day offer an explanation for the emergence of awareness from unconscious matter. I'd like to know how consciousness is preserved, coded, and expressed by the genes, and whether we should then start worrying that consciousness is genetically determined, which therefore implies the impossibility of free will. Not to mention the answer to even more fundamental questions about consciousness, or more accurately awareness: What is it? That is, is it made up of the same elementary particles, the quarks that make up the rest of the universe? If not, what sort of material is it? Where does it exist? If it exists in the mind, is the mind contained in the brain? Does the mind differ from the brain? Is it determined by the brain and thus functionally nonindependent?

I'd be happy if science could explain all that. It would make for a simpler, less annoyingly mysterious world.

For some time, however, I have resigned myself to the so-called "Mysterian" position on this question offered by the Oxford-trained philosopher Colin McGinn, who argued in a illuminating book (melodramatically titled The Mysterious Flame) that we may never find an explanation of consciousness because (to oversimplify a bit) we are trapped within consciousness. One thing the book has going for it is its profound humility before the mystery it confronts.

Tallis takes on the problem from a different angle. He questions whether consciousness can be explained as an evolutionary development. Tallis points out that consciousness remains a mystery even to hard-core evolutionary scientists and cites a passage from the Darwinist/atheist Richard Dawkins' The Blind Watchmaker:
"Cumulative selection, once it has begun, seems ... powerful enough to make the evolution of intelligence probable, if not inevitable." Seems "powerful enough"? That doesn't sound very scientific. It sounds, in fact, like faith-based overconfidence in science, an admission that we have no answer, just hope that one will develop. Just as many religious types hope for the coming of the Messiah in a fiery apocalypse.

In fact, Dawkins' all-too-casual, almost dismissive language here offers a rare admission of a big open question: the fact that neither he nor his theory has yet to find a scientific explanation of—even to agree on a definition of—consciousness. It always makes me queasy when advocates of science take cheap shots at creationism and intelligent design as if they have All the Answers themselves. I am deeply skeptical about intelligent design, too, but it's important to acknowledge that "our" side doesn't have all the answers, that no matter how much we know, mysteries remain. Someday, science may well explain how a random mutation resulted in consciousness where none had been before.

Tallis is particularly good on the old argument about the evolution of the eye. He doesn't say that the human eye could never have been achieved through evolution because of its "irreducible complexity," as the intelligent-design advocates do. Rather, he points out the difference between explaining the development of a complex and sensitive means for registering the visual world and explaining the nature, location, and stuff of visual awareness:

Firstly, chemical or electrochemical sensitivity to light is not the same as awareness of light. Secondly, the content of awareness of light—brightness, color, never mind beauty or meaning—is not to be found in electromagnetic radiation, which is not intrinsically bright, colored, beautiful or meaningful. These secondary and tertiary qualities are not properties of the physical world and the energy in question. Thirdly, it is not clear how certain organizations of matter manage to be aware—of impingements of energy, and later of objects, and (in the case of humans) of themselves—when very similar organizations of matter do not have this property. This problem is more evident much further down the evolutionary path, when we look at neurons that are, and those that are not, associated with consciousness in the human brain and see how little distinguishes them. The biological story of the evolution of the eye from single cells to full-blown eyes tells us nothing about the journey from light incident on photosensitive cells, producing a programmed response, to the gaze that looks out and sees, and peers at, and inquires into, a visible world. ... Computers, after all, do not get any nearer to being conscious as the inputs are more complexly related to their outputs, however many stages and layers of processing intervene between the two. There is nothing, in short, that will explain why matter in a certain form will go "mental".
I disagree with Tallis on at least one point. He insists that consciousness must have an adaptive evolutionary explanation. And indeed human consciousness may at first have been adaptive. But adaptive functions can go awry, as when a species' reproductive capacity outstrips its food supply. And if you look at the last century in terms of war and slaughter and genocide, you have to wonder whether the more violent tendencies of consciousness are turning out to be maladaptive. Otherwise, why would we consciously place our species in danger of extinction through a Faustian bargain with nuclear physics?

Like Tallis, Colin McGinn is particularly good in condemning materialist explanations of consciousness, pointing out that it's impossible to collapse the mind into the brain. Or, as he puts it: "[T]he mind is ... meat neither more nor less." To the materialist the feeling of "pain, for example, is nothing more than a firing of certain fibers in the brain. The feeling of pain simply reduces to such physical processes. The two are not merely correlated; they are identical." To the materialist, Mr. McGinn continues, "the mind is the brain in disguise. The djinn is the lamp."

He goes on to point out that he could hypothetically "know everything about your brain of a neural kind ... its anatomy, its chemical ingredients, the pattern of electrical activity in its various segments ... the position of every atom and its subatomic structure ... everything that that materialist says your mind is. Do I thereby know everything about your mind? It certainly seems not. On the contrary, I know nothing about your mind. I know nothing about which conscious states you are in ... and what these states feel like to you..."

If they are not, if in fact consciousness is an instance of dualism—of the mind being somehow different, not identical with the brain—of what then is the nonmaterial "stuff" of consciousness, the "self" and all that, made? Philosophers tie themselves into knots seeking to resolve these questions. (Thomas Nagel's review of Galen Strawson's new book, *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics*, in the *London Review of Books* is a particularly good display of the incredible difficulties of the problem, although my favorite recent book on the subject is the brief but cogent *Seeing Red* by Nicholas Humphrey.)

Another acute critic of the pure materialist theory of consciousness is the mathematician and philosopher David Berlinski, whose impressively argued critique of scientific certainty on the subject can be found in his new book, *The Devil's Delusion*. Berlinski has suffered—unfairly, I think—from the fact that his work often appears in the pages of a religiously-oriented publication (*Commentary*) and from the suspicion that he has some hidden creationist or intelligent-design agenda. Which he explicitly disclaims. Berlinski is scrupulous not to suggest that he has the answer or that God is the answer or any of that. He just doesn't think, when it comes to the evolution of "awareness," that anybody has All the Answers. Or any of them.
McGinn and Tallis and Berlinski: the mysterians! "Metaphysical heretics" might be more dignified, but I like the fact that from Mysterians take the name from the '60s one-hit-wonder rock group Question Mark and the Mysterians, best known for "96 Tears," which became a seminal influence on punk and No Wave later on. They've got what you might call a philosophical version of a punk rock attitude toward on these questions, a disdain for the nobs who sit on their fat certainties. I consider them heroic for entertaining heresies that dismay the religious and the irreligious, both of whom claim too much.

It's a difficult place to be, not knowing whether one can know the answer to the deepest mysteries. I think David Foster Wallace—particularly in his book on infinity—felt this acutely. He was a Mysterian. Hamlet was: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy," he says. (At least, that's how it appears in the Quarto of the play; in the Folio it's "in our philosophy." Did Shakespeare revise? We still don't know.)

Nabokov: I don't see him as a Mysterian. I think he saw it all like Milton's God did, spread out in space and time before him. He wasn't a Mysterian because "it" wasn't a mystery to him. Part of what is intriguing about his work is the way you get glimpses of his vision, his metaphysical synesthesia.

When I say the mystery of consciousness is a dangerous one, what I mean is that nobody wants to admit they don't have things All Figured Out, and it's particularly destabilizing not figuring yourself out. Where do my thoughts come from? Are they determined by my biochemistry? Is my reaction to this column the product of free will?

If I had the time, I would establish an international Mysterian society for those who recognize that the universe is still a profoundly mysterious place and yet don't want to be alone thinking dark thoughts about it. That's really all I want to do. It bothers me. I want it to bother others, too.

The same goes for the other two primordial unanswered questions on the borderline of physics and metaphysics:

First: Why is there something rather than nothing? And second: What exactly is the crucial difference between nonliving and living entities?

Ever since Stephen Hawking's book A Brief History of Time became a best-seller (and despite the fact he now admits he was wrong about his entire theory of black holes in that book), many physicists would have us believe that string theory (or "m-theory," as it's now most fashionably called) explains why there is something rather than nothing. One of the latest fashionable theories of why there is something rather than nothing is called "quantum tunneling," which seems to posit that being came into being by means of insubstantial equations or "quantum fluctuations in a vacuum." Sorry, guys, but if there are fluctuations in it, then there's Something in it, already. It's not Nothing, if you see what I mean. Jim
Holt does a great job discrediting quantum tunneling and other such something-from-nothing quantum theory dodges in this podcast interview. Holt is writing a whole book about the attempts, so far futile, to solve the Something/Nothing question. The final Big Three Unsolved Mystery: pinpointing the very beginning of life. I'm satisfied Darwinian theory can explain everything from the evolution of the very first "living" entity from a single cell to Nabokov. But I have yet to see any persuasive explanation of the jump from no life to life and how it came about. Please don't refer me to that discredited old chestnut of an experiment in which an electric current was run through a soup of organic molecules and some amino acids were found. Amino acids are chemicals, not life, and ceaseless attempts to create life—to manipulate those amino acids in such a way that they start replicating and evolving in a beaker in one way or another—have failed, as Berlinski painstakingly demonstrated.

It seems to me that people should care more that these questions are not answered. Or stop living in denial, thinking they have been. I don't think religion has the answers, but I don't think science does either. Yet. Whether it ever will is the fourth great mystery.